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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NIAMEY 000713

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [PINR](#) [NG](#)
SUBJECT: NIGER: MINISTRY OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS (MRA)

REF: A. NIAMEY 202
[1](#)B. NIAMEY 703

Classified By: Ambassador Bernadette M. Allen, Reason 1.4 b/d

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. Ambassador, accompanied by locally-engaged staff Political Assistant (notetaker), paid a May 16 courtesy call on the recently-appointed Cabinet Minister for the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA), Issaka Labo. The MRA's responsibilities include a security element complementary to the Ministry of Interior and Decentralization (MID) functions. Labo emphasized that the MRA is not a ministry of Islamic affairs, that it will focus on all religious denominations in Niger. The new Ministry does not yet have an operating budget, but expects operating funds to be drawn from the operating budgets of other Ministries. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) MRA Leadership. Minister Issaka Labo, appointed to his position on March 1, 2007, is reported to be in his mid-fifties. He is a Hausa speaker from the Maradi region and is married. Prior to his current appointment, he was Administrative and Financial Director at the Ministry of Higher Education. He served as Government of Niger (GON) Minister of Health from 1994-1995. He was the Administrative and Financial Director at the National Agricultural Research Institute (INRAN) from 1993-1994. His party affiliation is Parti Social Democrate Nigerien (PSDN), an affiliate of the Mouvement National pour la Societe de Developpement (MNSD).

[1](#)3. (U) MRA Role. The establishment of the MRA, according to the Minister, is long overdue and a Ministry that Nigeriens have wanted for some time. He stated the MRA has begun its social dialogue with various institutions, such as the National Council for Political Dialogue (CNDP), the National Council for Social Dialogue (CNDS) and the High Commission for the Restoration of Peace (HCRP). Labo said that Niger's society has a strong religious component which should be taken into account in social and political dialogue, thus his role and that of the MRA will be to ensure that the GON bears in mind religious views in the implementation of government policies and programs. For example, he mentioned that the GON is sensitizing the population and religious leaders on the Additional Protocol to the African Human and People's Rights Charter Relating to Women's Rights in Africa (the Maputo Protocol) and went as far as stating that the National Assembly (NA) would pass the bill on May 17. (Note: The NA has not yet started discussion on the Protocol (reftel B). End note.) He emphasized that the MRA will focus on all religious affairs and not solely focus on Islamic matters, covering everything from humanitarian projects to visits of religious leaders to establishment of religious schools. He added that he expects to dialogue regularly with a soon-to-be-established Christian Council, as he now does with the Islamic Council established in 2006. Labo said he is hopeful the MRA will help strengthen interfaith dialogue. He believes that religious ethics can be used in conjunction with educating the people on issues such as health, hygiene and anti-corruption. He suggested the MRA will work to

restructure koranic schools, focusing on curricula and payment to marabouts/teachers, the latter to stem problems such as child begging and trafficking in persons. He stated it is important for Nigerien youth to be educated in Niger because when parents send children abroad the education that they receive in foreign koranic schools sometimes creates negative influences contrary to Nigerien values.

14. (C) Security role. Underscoring the MRA security role, Labo noted that the MRA would combat religious extremism by monitoring activities of suspected fundamentalist leaders and groups. MRA will track the religious organizations' use of money and other material resources. When asked whether that was not already a responsibility of the MID, Labo responded that the MRA will partner with the MID on collection of information, using various surveillance activities, including telephone tapping. The MRA will insist that future mosque projects include components to contribute to the physical well-being of people in the local communities, such as wells, schools, health clinics, micro credit, etc.) He stated that some organizations build mosques and do nothing to alleviate the poverty among the Nigerien people. Moreover, he noted that most religious/humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGO) are led by foreigners and their management is suspect. Citing the African Muslim Agency (AMA), he said AMA mobilizes more resources than it invests in Niger. The MRA will insist on the placement of more Nigerien citizens in management positions, as Nigeriens are more familiar with the needs of the local community. Further, he believes that having more Nigerien managers will aid the security authorities' tracking of NGO activities and financial transactions. Labo welcomed the courtesy call and closed the meeting by requesting U.S. Embassy support to build the capacity of the MRA. He also called for increased

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cooperation and information sharing between the Embassy and the MRA.
ALLEN